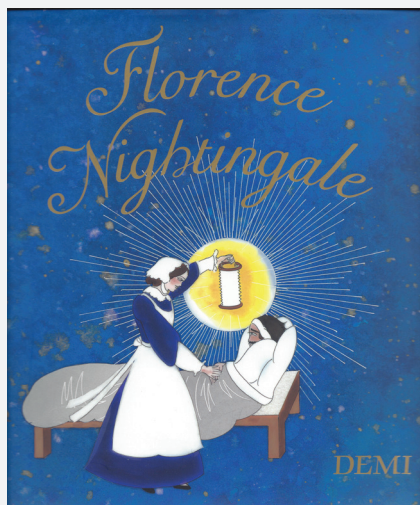


First Opinion: Picturing a Bright Light: Florence Nightingale, Human Rights, and the Health Professions

Demi. *Florence Nightingale*. New York, NY: Henry Holt, 2014. Print.

Gretchen Papazian



Demi's 2014 lovely picture book biography *Florence Nightingale* offers a solid introduction to its eponymous subject, nineteenth-century health professions innovator and human rights activist. Similar to Demi's other inspired and inspiring biographies of figures such as St. Francis of Assisi, Rumi, Lao Tzu, Mother Theresa, Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, and Joan of Arc, *Florence Nightingale* grounds Nightingale's life story around her spirituality and how it served as the foundation for her humanitarian accomplishments. The book, in fact, fixes more on Nightingale's commitment to her principles (i.e., pursuing her goals despite the social conventions of her time) and her social justice efforts (i.e., working with "Women in Distressed Circumstances," raising money and advocating for changes in hospital procedures and care, and leading efforts to improve both conditions in workhouses and health care for the poor) than it does on her specific accomplishments in the fields of medicine and science. There are plenty of other Nightingale biographies for children—even picture books—that detail the latter. Demi's achievement is in creating a beautiful and compelling first acquaintance with the notable personage.

Florence Nightingale is not the only Florence Nightingale book to generate a sense of the medical professional as a visionary with deep convictions, but its illustrations make it genuinely stand out among its peers. Demi is an extraordinary artist. Personally, I have long admired her picture books—the detail of her pen and ink work; the contrast of the thick, sharp outlines

around the layered transparency of her watercolors; and the precise and carefully crafted framing and layout of pages. *Florence Nightingale* uses more craft paper, textiles, and reproduced art in its mixed media than any of Demi's other books. The technique creates a highly busy feel on some of the pages, but rather than being a shortcoming the effect generates a feeling of upper-class Victorian womanhood as, simultaneously, highly important and highly constrained.

In fact, this is a book consistent in format: the double-page spread with very busy, multi-media, filled-with-clashing-patterns, indoor images placed opposite calmer images of the outdoors—scenes created with mostly ink and watercolor in more coordinated color palettes. These double-page spreads work quite beautifully in support of the descriptions of Nightingale as a person whose efforts on behalf of others stand not only as outside of her time (and the limits it tried to impose upon her) but as honorable, just, and exceptional in *any* time. Demi's cover and back cover images, perhaps, put an even finer point on this with a single shared image of Nightingale (in a navy dress in a white apron and cap, holding her glowing "Lady with Lamp" lantern) against a field of cobalt spattered with gold paint, which creates a sense of Nightingale as an exceptionally bright star in the vastness of the universe.

As children's nonfiction, *Florence Nightingale* meets most of the current, generally accepted evaluation criteria. The language and syntax are direct and measured, making for, if not the most exciting read-aloud book, an even pace and clear expression of ideas. And, while the book's narrative sequencing is a bit list-y—reading more like a sequence of points rather than animating a complex, figured life—it nonetheless generates a vibrant sense of the importance of Nightingale's efforts and achievements. The book is likely to stimulate interest in finding out more about her and maybe even other human rights figures, as well as other innovators in the fields of science and medicine. Indeed, as all good nonfiction ought to, this book encourages the reader to delve further into its topics by including both a more detailed timeline and a list of books for further reading. Therefore, this is an excellent first biography of Florence Nightingale.

Works Cited

Demi. *Florence Nightingale*. New York, NY: Henry Holt, 2014. Print.

About the Author

Gretchen Papazian is an associate professor at Central Michigan University. She teaches and studies children's literature, American literature, and cultural studies. Her recent publications include scholarly articles on picture books, video games, and early readers. Once upon a time, she too dreamed of being a scientist, and she is delighted by both the focus of this journal issue and the existence of this crop of books.